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ABSTRACT

Social pressures on college administrators regarding disadvantaged students are discussed from the viewpoint of one community college president who emphasizes the vagueness of the term "disadvantaged." It is noted that for many students the campus is their first sustained immersion in a going, middle-class, American community, and that its impact is intense. The problems associated with decentralization of programmatic decision making for ethnic group students are discussed. Current emphasis on individual curriculum development is noted. Questions are raised regarding values and methods of teaching. The role of the academic business officer in relating to both the educational institution and the community at large is assessed. (LBH)

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"Every student I have ever faced has been disadvantaged." *Dr. William M. Birenbaum*
Below is President Birenbaum's paper, delivered at the NACUBO 1971 Annual Meeting.

SOCIAL PRESSURES ON MANAGEMENT: DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

By William M. Birenbaum

There are some people who question whether or not a two-year college is really a college or whether it is half of a college, and it follows from that that there are some who would regard the president of such an institution as being something less than a whole president.

There is a story about a small liberal arts college in Kentucky which, naturally, was in financial difficulties and was trying to raise money. It was in a town where there was only one family of substantial wealth. It was headed by a widow, and the family's wealth had been accumulated as a result of siring very successfully a breed of race horses. The president was sent by his board to this widow lady to persuade her to give their college a million dollars or two, and, after talking with her, found her somewhat receptive to the idea. She was a crusty old lady and she said, "You know, the horses really made the money for the family and the sire of this line is out there in the pasture. He's too old to run. But I think he would appreciate having an honorary degree from your college. And if that can be arranged, we might give some money."

So the president carried this message back to his board. They were a little stunned at first, but they needed the dough and they agreed to the ceremony. On the occasion, the chairman of the board was standing at a rostrum, as I am doing, and the president led this magnificent old horse onto the platform. And the chairman began the citation by saying, "Ladies and gentlemen, this is a most unusual occasion in the history of our college, because it is the first time we have awarded an honorary degree to a *whole* horse."

Well, I am a college president and I sometimes think my faculty think I am but half of one and I know my business officer, who is in this audience watching me like a hawk, regards me also as something less than a whole one, and I will leave it to your imagination which half.

I really don't know why I am here this morning talking to you people. Everybody knows college presidents know nothing about the business affairs of their institutions. Business officers have to keep them out of trouble and sometimes, as in my case, out of jail.

There is another story about two distinguished American literary figures of the same vintage who, for a part of their careers, both made a living out of giving lectures on circuit. They were famous enemies. One was Henry James who was very elegant, impeccable, always dressed beautifully, spoke magnificently; and the other was Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens). The story is that Clemens once was to give a lecture in a small city in the south of France. He went to check into a pension and right on the ledger above where he was to sign in, written in a very beautifully elaborate script, were the words "Henry James and valet." And Samuel Clemens picked up the pen and immediately signed in, "Samuel Clemens and valise." The keeper of the pension looked at him and said, "Monsieur, I understand this 'valet', but what is this 'valise'?" and Clemens replied immediately, "Any fool knows that 'valise' is the feminine of 'valet'."

I come to you as a beat-up college president of a so-called community college, unaccompanied by a valet but with a battered valise out here in the checkroom ready to make a hasty retreat after I now say what I am going to say.

About "disadvantaged," there is some confusion as to what is meant, and as one who has taught and still teaches, it has been my experience that every student I have ever faced has been disadvantaged. In spite of every institutional effort to group human beings categorically (gifted or deficient, freshman or senior, open admittee or honor student), these categorical classifications of people some-

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how seem inadequate to translate human diversity into the institutional rubrics. America being what it is, every student I have ever had, either as the consequence of an imperfect combination of genes or emerging from American culture, given what it has been and still is, has arrived in my classroom or seminar room bruised, hurt, but also sometimes eager and potential.

There is a tendency in this country now to equate being black or Spanish-speaking or poor with being disadvantaged. All of us know, on the other hand, that the backbone of the disruptions of the sixties was mainly not these students but the children out of homes like yours and mine; and that the great malaise that has overcome young people in our country transcends color and economic status.

If we mean by disadvantaged that we are now confronted with a large, new clientele who, through our systems of keeping people out in the past (the systems we call admissions), are getting in, and that they represent a somewhat different approach to what we are, then perhaps we are talking about the same cadre of people here this morning. About those people, it is undoubtedly true the minority group youth, the children of the poor who are now getting in, often bring to our red-blooded, model, ideal, American communities—colleges and universities—a somewhat different experience in American society than those of us who come out of the more traditional cadres of the middle and upper middle classes. For most of these young people, the gaps between what we have promised, what we have said in our Fourth of July Day speeches and our commencement addresses, and the realities of the ways they have grown up are very, very large.

I have met young black students out at Bedford-Stuyvesant and Harlem, at my college and other places I have been in New York, who, when I say "law" to them, when I suggest that there is a profession to be practiced there toward which human beings might aspire in this country, the image that I evoke in their minds may be either of street survival or of an experience in a police court. When I say to these people "medicine," the image evoked in many minds is of degrading waiting rooms in dirty outclinics or the corner drug store. And when we tell these people to aspire to participate in American society, they are inclined to review the extent and nature of their prior participation in order to understand what *we* may have in mind when we say "participate."

The New Clients of Middle-Class Colleges

I don't know how it is where you come from, but for the overwhelming majority of my students (black, white and Puerto Rican), their approach to our campus is for many of them their first sustained immersion in a going, middle-class, American, working community. Most of the black kids come to our place from neighborhoods where everything visible is black, where there is a suspicion that the controlling decision-making centers may not be black, but those are not visible. They arrive at my place where there is a white president, mostly white deans, mostly white teachers and mostly white students. We elect department chairmen in my university. That means across the twenty campuses of City University, over 90 per cent of them turn out, as a result of the enlightened democratic process in New York, to be white and over 90 per cent of those turn out to be male. Our new students find themselves in a living situation where the visible power centers are white and they are alien. Many of the young Italians, who are first-generation collegians—the majority of my student body—haven't got the vaguest idea of what a college is. They come in asking the most "ridiculous" questions. I have actually heard students stand up in public on my campus and ask a faculty member what a credit hour is. I have heard students so "stupid" as to challenge a whole faculty regarding the standards upon which it bases its grades. Well, I'll tell you . . . any red-blooded, white middle-class kid of a red-blooded, white, middle-class American culture would not ask such "stupid" questions. The trouble is the answers to such questions are very elusive. Our faculty hadn't faced the problem of what a credit hour really is for a long time, and they are still trying to think up the answer to explain either the system by which they grade their clients or the system by which they recommend the promotion and tenuring of each other.

If there is a breakdown in our pretentions in this kind of place (the academic community), the impact of this upon the new clientele is intensified and severe. It is a kind of final underscoring of the prior hypocrisies which they have experienced. We say to these young people, "You're going to college," and they say, "What's a college?" And I will tell you one thing none of your bulletins say, and one thing that no president in his right mind would ever stand up in public and say, is that "You are going to college which is a corporation or a factory." We don't talk about it that way. We do perhaps at meetings like this. We sure don't talk about it that way in public. We talk about college as a *community* experience, a *learning community*. We even talk about it still as a *community* of scholars. It may seldom be that any more, if it ever was. But we talk about it that way. And because we talk about it as a community, we talk about it as if it is something—as all communities have to be—that is susceptible to being governed. We say to these students, "Self-government." We don't say student government is Mickie Mouse. We give them a few weeks of the first semester to find that out for themselves. But we invite them to participate in governing themselves. If they survive four weeks and read the student newspaper or hear what is going on in the cloakrooms and the local pubs, they will understand quickly that the faculty talks about itself as if they are

governed by something called faculty democracy. What a fraud that is from coast to coast—private and public, liberal arts and technical, college and university!

The Community-Corporation Dichotomy

Now the fraudulence of the instruments for campus government tend to reveal a certain fraudulence about the nature of the community and expose quickly the corporate nature of what we are dealing with. If it is a place that is unionized, not only the people who sweep up and run the cafeteria, plant the grass and all that stuff, but the people who teach, too; (everybody is unionized at my place except me, and I have been thinking about it), then the corporate character of the place tends to dominate. Pretty soon the new students realize that there is a real dichotomy between a community which is to be governed and a corporation which is to be managed, and this dichotomy exposes a new hypocrisy among those of us in charge who talk about law and order instead of talking more frankly about directives and rules, who talk about student participation instead of talking more frankly about the regimentation of the consumer for production purposes. This dichotomy between community and corporation is, I think, one of the sharpest paradoxes you are confronting and will confront.

We all know that governments have managerial dimensions and I am not inveighing against management. But I am saying that we still talk the language of community, of citizenry participation, but we are creating institutions which operate, function, create a milieu more like that of the corporate enterprise than of the community enterprise. I am president, but believe me nobody voted for me. I don't know how it is where you come from: I cannot explain to my student body how the people who are in charge, from the senior professors and the departmental chairmen through the deans, the provosts and the vice president, how they correspond in the way they were chosen, their powers and their accountability, to the concept of democratic community into which we are attempting to initiate these people.

I think this basic paradox leads to a second one which has me puzzled, and I don't know exactly what to do about it at the moment. Here in New York, the big talk of the day is regionalization, consolidation, cooperation in order to create efficiency, avoid duplication, etc., etc. Now, of course, the great instruments for all of this are twofold: first, it is restructuring organization generally in a manner that has nothing to do with the consumer except as the organization reorganized may affect his life; and, secondly, the computer. I think perhaps one of the most profoundly important decisions City University is now facing is whether to continue along its present route of computerizing each center independently (and there are twenty campuses) or creating one master computer center at 80th Street for the whole thing. Either way it goes, according to my estimates, the cost will be roughly thirty times more than the total cost of open admissions so far, and the consequences operationally will be fantastic as they affect uniformity in admission policy, recording of grades and the transaction of much of the other vital business of the place.

Decision Making: Centralized or Localized

While on the one hand these pressures gravitate toward the centralization of decision-making power and the removal of it to more and more remote levels from the people who are to be affected by it, on the other hand, the new diversity of students coming in, the new trends in education programming itself, all argue for more and more decentralization of programmatic decision-making power.

The emphasis now is almost on a one-to-one sort of thing in tailor-making programs for the clients. The required curricula are going by the board. Dropping out for a while is becoming as respectable as dropping in. Diversity among the students and in teaching methods is the talk of the front-line innovators and experimenters. When I go to a board meeting at City University, I hear both of these things talked about with equal vigor—the need for more cooperation and consolidation, avoidance of duplication and overlap through the centralization of key decision-making power, sometimes using important technology systems to do it—like the computers; while, on the other hand, lip service to the concept of campus autonomy, programmatic autonomy within the campus, the desire to allow each place to tailor itself in its own image, the need to revive the feeling of community among the local population so that they will have some new identity with the thing that they are working with, so that we can combat the feeling of remoteness and detachment which the clients have about the thing.

I think this paradox is part and parcel of the first one—a failure to distinguish clearly the difference between management and government.

This leads to my climactic dichotomy and it's about you. If one opts for a continuing effort to maintain a community base for the learning enterprise and if one opts to give new meanings through action to the traditional American values, concentrating upon self, upon individual enterprise, upon diversity of each individual, then the question is: How does a vice president or a provost or a dean of what you do fit into such an option of values? Can you teach? Do you stand for something special that you really know? And can you convey that to others? Even if you do wear on your foreheads that obnoxious label in the academic community—business—do you stand for the traditional American virtues associated with that?

About that, let me just briefly remind you of the key virtues. Foremost is not monopoly but free enterprise. Foremost is not the mobilization of resources in order to create—pardon the expression—stability, but risk-taking. Foremost is not the emphasis upon the kind of monopolistic collaboration that results in a captive market and an exclusivity in the control of the production resources, but a kind of competitive and entrepreneurial approach to those resources. I would guess, unless the whole thing falls apart, which is a possibility, unless the whole country is converted into a corporate state, rigid and up-tight in its organization of religious institutions, industrial institutions and the government itself, unless that happens, then the future of your dimension in the life of the community for learning purposes will depend on how the young people entering your calling now are encouraged to define their teaching role in the enterprise and are encouraged to reassert the traditional values of managing the economic muscle of an institution of key importance in American life.

There is a wall around our campuses in 1971. Every campus we have has a wall around it. The walls separate it from the community. Every one of these walls has a gate in it. Every one of these gates has a key. Every key, until very recently, was meant to keep people out. That is changing. It has also been a wall between thinking and the respectability of acting in concert with the process of mastering thought. The internship, the apprenticeship, the independent study project, the year abroad, the dropping out for a period of time without penalty so that one can drop back if he chooses to, these are the new things, having a Renaissance on the current scene. You people preside over one of the great action laboratories in which the clientele should be immersed in new ways as a part of their own learning experience. If there is to be participatory power within the American concept of community, then where the real power is has to be participatory too. And until you begin to reconceive yourselves as legitimate teachers, advocates of legitimate values in American society regarding the manipulation and disposition of the kind of power for which you are responsible, then the corporate image will dominate; and I don't think we should ask these students—black, white, disadvantaged or otherwise—to be a part of our own Mickie Mouse. Let's forget it. It's like going to Macy's or A & S, and let's do it that way. If we do it that way, there will also be problems. Again, I don't know how it is in your towns, but here, if you buy something at A & S and you get it home and it doesn't work, there is a special department at A & S where you can take it. The lines there are not as big as the lines on a typical registration day at my college. And when you get to the head of the counter, there is a reasonably courteous clerk there who will examine it. You have a good chance of either getting your money back or the product replaced. You can't do that at my college. At my college, if you draw F's and the Course and Standing Committee says "Out!", all the presumptions are that you, the customer, are wrong. We even issue an official piece of paper that goes to every other producer in the country saying, "The customer was wrong."

I think your options are very exciting ones now. You have got to reaffirm your own role as teachers and open your own operations to a fuller participation by the citizens of the learning community.

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